



The Poetics of Baseball: An American Domestication of the Mathematically Sublime

(to the memory of my father)

Brian G. Caraher

The strange congruence of baseball and poetics has something arresting, persuasive and peculiarly American about it. There are certainly innumerable poems about the game. Yet a theory of baseball as a game that approximates the pleasures and gratifications of poetic design and play has scarcely been pursued. I would like to claim that the sport of baseball involves more than a game of chance. Indeed my contention will be that a consistent, satisfying design and a coherent, cogent poetics can be disclosed at play within the various movements and measures of the game. This poetics, moreover, can best be judged as a homely and American version of the mathematically sublime.

In general, the game of baseball pivots upon the enumeration of specific acts and events: balls, strikes, outs, hits, bases, runs, innings and so on. Baseball, furthermore, appears to offer a deceptively simple yet sensually gratifying intuition of such enumeration as it reaches toward a state of *absolute magnitude*, toward a perpetually youthful image of *boundlessness*. In other words, the game of baseball with its various enumerable actions captures a sense of being beyond enumeration, of being boundless and unbounded. This curious sense of what I choose to call the mathematically sublime depends upon a compact design that

Illustration: *Play Ball* by Michael Langenstein, 1982. Reproduced with the kind permission of Samuel A. Ramirez (NYC).

orders the actions that can be performed in the game. In my judgment, the poetic design discoverable in baseball is as delightfully simple as the numerical series of 1, 2, 3 and 4. The fourth and final number in this series makes the design and the numerical progression work as a whole. It might be best, though, to work slowly through this series in order to recognize the value of each number before attempting to give a proper sense of the whole. Nevertheless, the number four puts into play the kind of mathematical sublimity that I would maintain is characteristic of the game of baseball.¹

I

The number *one*, of course, is the point at which any sense of enumeration and progression towards mathematical amplitude, mathematical greatness or absolute magnitude must begin. In baseball the number one marks or counts any individual event or individual performance. Events in baseball must be tallied individually. There's one pitch, one ball, one strike, one hit, one out, one error, one run counted or recorded at a time. More importantly, performances stand out in their singularity: the quality and performance of the pitcher, the eye and power or dexterity of the hitter, the control and deftness of the catcher, the quickness and execution of the infielder, the speed and timing of the outfielder, the intelligence and foresight of the manager or third-base coach, and so on. The agility and precision of any *individual* performance works to gain a *singular* outcome: a strike, an out, a hit, a run, a fly ball, a foul ball, a wasted pitch, a home run. Even the cardinal demand put upon any batter, especially the lead-off hitter—*get to first* base, whether on a hit, a walk, a hit batsman, a passed third strike or an error—encapsulates this point. And, of course, the multiform annals of baseball are filled with the memories, records, statistics, legends and sentimental exaggerations of the timely feats and notorious failures of individual players and their performances. The number one is the necessary point at which any possible sense of magnitude commences in baseball.

The number *two* is the figure of contest or *agon* in baseball. Two teams square off against one another in any given game or series of games. The pitcher squares off against the hitter, and the hitter battles the pitcher and any fielding position toward which he may be trying to drive or pull the ball past. The fielder pursuing a drive, a grounder or a fly ball engages also in a contest of time and skill with the opposing hitter-*cum*-base-runner. The quality and success of any given individual performance is almost always forged and tested in some agonistic contest that momentarily pits *two* players against *one* another.

Moreover, the number two shows up when the pitcher or defense has an advantage in the *agon* in progress with an opposing hitter—namely, two strikes or two outs. The next pitch or the next play can shut down the opposing team offensively, at least until the next inning or the next game in a series. Even better, the team in the field, with one or no outs recorded and a runner or two threatening, can suddenly stage that almost miraculous defensive *coup d'etat*, the double-play, and take two outs and two runners away in one quick play. Yet the batsman

or team on the offense can have the number two figure to its distinct advantage as well. A hitter can *double* and render considerable damage; a two-bagger can clear the bases of runners, bringing one or more home to score. A lead-off double signals a tough inning for a pitcher and a defense and can send a flagging pitcher to an early seat on the sidelines. *Second* base, of course, is the first of *two* bases often labeled “scoring position.” The number two yields as much of an offensive as well as a defensive advantage in baseball’s agonistic contest of skills and chance.

The number *three* in baseball is the most obvious figure of enumerated magnitude. Its presence, moreover, is the very figure of containment, of *boundedness*. Three strikes and the batter’s out; the pitcher has successfully contained the potential threat posed by the man at the plate. Three outs and a team is out of their half of an inning; the defense has successfully held and contained the offense. Three is the number of chances given to a batter or a team to do or to perform something while at bat. When three chances are rung out—first by strikes and then by outs—containment is final. Runners left on base are rendered null and void, though recorded in the statistics with the oftentimes sad and embarrassing rubric LOB. Indeed, moving a runner to third and stranding him at the end of an inning is the summary image of the number three as the figure of containment. The runner perches only one base, one hit, one error, one steal, away from scoring a run; yet he’s simply one more LOB if the defense successfully contains or bounds his movement. The offense can even load the bases with three runners and still be held in check, held to *three* LOB at the end of an inning. And very rarely, yet almost always spectacularly, a team on defense can execute that demolishing gesture of absolute containment—the triple-play. Three runners and three outs gone in a thoroughly unanticipated net of containment!

The pattern of three as the figure of containment demarcates the overall design of outs and innings in the modern game of baseball. A team is allowed 27 outs—that is, 3^3 number of outs. This allotment of outs, of course, is distributed over nine innings, also factorable by three. The modern habit of box scoring even underwrites this design of threefold containment: three groupings of three innings apiece. Moreover, a perfect game engineered by a particular pitcher would involve going through the opposing team’s batting order only three times. A perfect game exhibits in all respects the image of perfect threefold containment: 3×9 batters, all contained three at a time. An extra-inning game breaks the perfect pattern, but nonetheless each extra inning allows three outs apiece to each team in order to break or maintain threefold containment. A home team with the lead need not come to bat in the bottom of the ninth, of course. They expend only 24 of their allowable outs; they have managed to *exceed containment* by the visiting team, and the asymmetry of the box score images forth their victorious exceeding of the limits that could have bound them in defeat.

The number *four* in baseball yields the very figure of exceeding limits, of breaking containment, of scoring the run or runs needed for victory. Scoring a run, needless to say, means touching safely and ever so briefly that “fourth base,”

home plate. Even so seemingly slight a thing as a single hit or a walk not only breaks the potential pattern of a perfect game but quite often signifies that some measure of the batting order will come to the plate *a fourth* time before the game is over. A walk, a hit, a home run, an error, or the like also signifies that *a fourth* batter will very likely come to the plate in a given inning. Even the manner of issuing a walk bears out the significance of the number four. The fourth ball signals the momentary failure or defeat of the pitcher; the batter has not been contained with three strikes or an out; he has gotten the pitcher to exceed the limit of allowable balls—three, of course—and can take first base at any pace he wishes. Walking, coming home safely on a hit or a fly ball, scoring on a steal or a passed ball, bringing the clean-up batter to the plate in the first inning, and so on, all are marked by the figure of four.

The home run best exhibits the imaginative significance of the number four. Even an attempt at a rather pedestrian neutrality in the rhetoric of an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry that describes the nature of the home run cannot inhibit the incipient poetics of this consummate gesture of a batter at the plate:

The acme of successful batting is to drive a pitched ball *beyond the confines of the playing field* (usually into the stands among the spectators, or completely out of the park) inside fair territory (i.e., between the foul lines). A ball so driven is called a home run. It has *passed beyond the reach of any fielder* and entitles the batter to run at any speed around the bases to score a run at home plate.² (Italics mine)

The home run is the sudden, abrupt and almost always spectacular exceeding of limits in baseball. A batter drives the ball *beyond containment*, and neither the field nor any fielder can bound its movement. Without further individual effort and without any threat of being thrown out approaching any base, the hitter can make a full circuit of the bases and tally a run by touching the *fourth* one. Such a powerful display of boundlessness merits the complete trip, according to the rules of baseball, and without question. And there are those moments in a season or a pivotal series when a home run appears to be nothing less than the consummate gesture of a miraculous power to exceed otherwise binding limits.

A case in point might be Ozzie Smith's unexpected exceeding, in a game played in October of 1985, of the stereotypical limits placed upon a shortstop. In the fifth game of that year's National League Championship Series, the St. Louis Cardinals were playing their third and final home game of the series. They had come back to tie the Dodgers two games to two and sought an edge on Los Angeles before having to return to the recently inhospitable environs of Dodger Stadium. In the bottom of the ninth inning, with one out and nobody on base and with a sense that this crucial fifth game might be going into extra innings, Ozzie Smith surely exceeded containment by homering off reliever Tom Neidenfuer of the Dodgers to give the Cards a sudden 3-2 victory and the decided advantage of a 3-2 lead in

the League Championship Series. It was his first home run batting left-handed in nearly 3000 at-bats, and this thoroughly unexpected yet highly decisive gesture of boundlessness earned the shortstop the honorific of "The Wizard of Oz."

When a hitter expected to produce home runs, especially with runners aboard, delivers one at just the right moment, it is no less "magical," no less expressive of rupturing containment. Jack Clark's 3-run blast well beyond the confines of left field of Dodger Stadium in the sixth game of the 1985 National League Championship Series perhaps rivals Ozzie Smith's "home stroke" in the fifth game. In the ninth inning, clinging to a 5-4 lead, the Dodgers, again with Neidenfuer on the mound, were attempting to contain the Cardinals and force a seventh and decisive game on home ground. Clark's home run demolished the hopes of containment and seemed to make the now-necessary bottom half of the inning one of desperation and eventual despair for the Dodgers.

The names "home run" and "home plate" merit further discussion. There are singles, doubles and triples in baseball but no similar descriptive term for a four-base hit. Indeed, there is no "fourth base"; it's importantly "home plate." A *qualitative difference* is invested in safely achieving that *fourth* base: home plate is not simply another base, and a home run is not simply just another hit. The two terms register the attainment of a desired end: the breaking of containment and the bringing *home* of a score that manifests the exceeding of threefold limits. I will return later to additional amplifications of the word "home," but here it is enough to suggest that the figure four—veiled as it is by the word "home"—is the figure not merely of quantitative success in baseball but is *the* figure of a subtly articulated yet perpetually desirable breaking of confining limits.

Not only are the terms "fourth base" and "quadruple-base hit" or "a quadruple" significantly elided in baseball parlance, but there is no "fourth baseman." This point may seem trivial, yet it further underscores the significance of the number four. Who covers or guards the fourth and final base? The three other bases have their appointed guardians, but who properly safeguards home plate? The catcher, of course, appears to be a good candidate, even though his generic name highlights his function as the second member of the pitching battery. Yet the pitcher and the batter may be seen as safeguarding the plate every bit as much as the catcher. It's actually the *triangulation* of these three players, who are pitted against one another in an *agon* of skills and chances, that struggles to safeguard the plate. The two defensive players struggle to contain the batter (and potential runner) and to command the strike zone as their own, while the batter struggles to avoid containment and enhance his chances of crossing the plate again through the counterclockwise circuit of the bases.

The "grand slam" fully underscores the significance of the number four; it is an offense's most devastating triumph over containment. A pitcher would like to bound the movement of the three runners on base, but a *fourth* man at the plate dramatically exceeds containment and brings four runs home to score. The grand slam, the grand triumph of the figure four, is not as rare an event as a triple-play, the spectacular triumph of the figure three; but its occurrence surely marks the

powerful attainment of a completely opposite end, the *fourfold* exceeding of the limits of containment.

II

This numerical series characterizes additional dimensions of the game. The World Series and, since 1985, the two League Championship Series have involved a best-of-seven-games sequence. The winning team obviously is the first and only team to take four games. Regardless of the outcome (and there are

1989 Regular Season Standings

National League				American League			
Final				Final			
East Division	W	L	Pct	East Division	W	L	Pct
Chicago	93	69	.574	Oakland	99	63	.611
New York	87	75	.537	Kansas City	92	70	.568
St. Louis	86	76	.531	California	91	71	.562
Montreal	81	81	.500	Texas	83	78	.511
Pittsburgh	74	88	.457	Minnesota	80	82	.494
Philadelphia	67	95	.414	Seattle	73	89	.451
West Division	W	L	Pct	Chicago	69	92	.429
San Francisco	92	70	.568	East Division	W	L	Pct
San Diego	89	73	.549	Toronto	89	73	.549
Houston	86	76	.531	Baltimore	87	75	.537
Los Angeles	77	83	.481	Boston	83	79	.512
Cincinnati	75	87	.463	Milwaukee	81	81	.500
Atlanta	63	96	.394	New York	74	87	.460
				Cleveland	73	89	.451
				Detroit	59	103	.364

The final regular-season standings for the two major leagues in 1989 are listed above. The ratio of 4-3 (4 wins-to-every-3 losses) can be recognized fairly easily in the results of the four division winners. The Cubs and the Giants exhibit the very ratios that I mention in section II of my essay, and the Athletics (99-63, or 4.7-3.0) and the Blue Jays (89-73, or 3.7-3.0) do not seem to show any grievous departure from the numerical pattern that I chart. An unusually dominant team, such as the Detroit Tigers of 1984, easily exceed more than 100 wins in a regular season and thereby win 5 games for every 3 they lose. They also tend to be unusually dominant in post-season play: Detroit posted 7 victories to the single one posted by Kansas City and San Diego.

It's also worth noting that the cellar-dwelling White Sox exhibit the characteristic ratio of a major league team bringing up the rear in a division: 69-92, or a perfect 3 wins-to-every 4 games lost. Detroit in 1989, however, was unusually non-dominant and basically reversed its fortunes as well as its win-loss ratio of five years before.

only four possibilities, 4-3, 4-2, 4-1 or 4-0), the number four signifies the victorious exceeding of containment. The losing team is *contained*, held at *three* or fewer games in their favor. The World Series did involve a nine-game sequence in 1903 and 1919-1921, but the more appropriate or fitting design of the best-of-seven series won out over the profit motive behind an extended sequence of games. Even statistical data answer to the design already articulated. The contests that garner most admiration are the 1-0 game, the 2-1 decision, and the shut-out regardless of the score. Yet on average the final score for a nine-inning, major league game is curiously enough 4-3; the losing team is contained at or limited to three runs while the victorious team exceeds such limits and time and again brings that *fourth* run *home*. Or look at earned-run averages (ERA). A good, usually successful pitcher is one who has an ERA in the vicinity of 3.0 or less; he holds opposing teams to three runs *per* game. Yet a mediocre to usually unsuccessful pitcher is one who sports an ERA in the vicinity of 4.0 or higher. Again, a matter of threes and fours: who contains well and who allows hitters to exceed containment a little too often.

The success or failure of an entire season seems marked by the design, or ratio, of 4-3. The divisional winner often will be the team that manages to win four games for every three they fail to take. A season record of 92-70 or 93-69 (or 88-66 in the older 154-game season) would more often than not place a club in a post-season best-of-seven series, looking for that crucial four-games-to-three advantage once again.

III

Yet why should this numerical series of 1, 2, 3 and 4 supply the sense of design for baseball? One supposition might be that baseball, after all, is a boy's game and that a compact register of arithmetical progression suits its "origins" and "primary" audience of appeal. However, since 1845 the design of the playing field and the rules of baseball have been developed and regularized by grown men, indeed professional associations of male adults.³ Youthful players make the game happen, but the shape of the game has been articulated by adult men for the purposes of mass entertainment and commercial profit. Baseball offers a bonanza of gratifications—physical, financial, commercial and sometimes ethically fraudulent as well—yet it does afford a striking mode of aesthetic satisfaction. It has a simple, supple poetics.

This compact arithmetical series of integers supplies the most economical yet flexible set of *rhetorical figures* expressive of the desire for absolute power and magnitude in a contest of skill, quickness and sudden opportunity. These numbers function as registers of the action in progress. They also signify the dominant rhetorical and poetical features by which this action can be characterized, represented, typified and understood as holistic and meaningful activity.

The number one, the figure of individual effort and singular performance, expresses the *lyricism* of the game. It's worthy of note that so many of the finer

poems, as well as the sentimental to maudlin ones such as “Casey at the Bat” and “Game Called by Darkness,” lyricize the quality and movement of an individual player or a particular play or type of play. The style, energy, execution and consequence of a special play or a specific player can evoke the concentrated attention and level of skill and adeptness characteristic of an individual performing at the peak of his personal abilities. A breaking ball with lots of movement just catching the outside corner of the plate, a batter beating out by half-a-step a long throw to first by a shortstop deep in the hole, a perfectly timed steal of home plate in the late innings of a close game, a running back-hand catch of a fly ball well in the gap between center and left fields, all these plays—perhaps by players already known for such play—strike the individual, lyrical quality of the game. Singular performances and singular performers generate the swiftly moving poems witnessed by the keen observers in the stands.

The number two, the figure of agonistic contest, declares the inherent *melodrama* of the game. Two teams and, with steady yet recurrent variety, two players are matched against one another. The hometown favorites take on a club of visiting challengers, many of whose characteristic skills and strengths are closely calibrated in order to exhibit signs of exploitable weakness. The localities, qualities and idiosyncracies of teams and players build up, consolidate, fragment and alienate loyalties and partisan judgments. The seemingly ageless pitching ace with more than 300 victories in his major league career opposes the young and hopeful ex-farmboy making his major league pitching debut. The home team in need of one more victory to secure sole possession of first-place before the All-Star break rallies in the eighth and ninth innings to satisfy the hometown fans who have come to see their team do battle with an age-old nemesis from a nearby city. The melodrama of pitched contest, of renewed rivalry, of the opposition of designated role against designated role, allows the playing out until completion of a sense of struggle for the advantage that enables victory. The matching of superb performance against superb performance to see whether the favorite or the challenger garners an edge or clearly excels is the entire appeal of the melodramatic contest. The game of baseball as a contest of skills and chances almost always assumes the plot of a ritually enacted and popularly recognized melodrama. Does one need to itemize in detail what’s at stake when the Red Sox play the Yankees, or the Cubs play the Cardinals, or the Yankees meet the Dodgers for a few games in October?

The full nature of this ritual melodrama, replete with its well articulated moments of lyricism, depends upon the rhetorical uses of the figures three and four. The number three, representing containment and boundedness, expresses one possible fate of the protagonist. When a player and a team have been contained or circumscribed by strike outs and put outs, their efforts yield defeat. Being stranded on base all too frequently produces the same dire fate. In other words, contained players and teams fail to complete the necessary and prescribed trial of the bases. They fail to *return home* or, equally important, fail to prevent the opposing team from *returning home* or *returning home in great numbers*. Ill

winds or bad fortune forestall their would-be heroic adventures. Defeated players retire desolately from the field of pitched contest, or they strand themselves on islands of temporary shelter and safety far from the desired harbor of home plate. I am, of course, melodramatizing this sense of containment, this sense of bounded and futile effort, because the plot elements of heroic adventure and melodrama seem present time and again in baseball. Here the enduring boyish, youthful or adolescent quality of the game actually resides. The *agon* of baseball presents a daily crucible of a well domesticated epic quest-adventure for the victorious return home to glory and recognition.

The victorious team achieves triumph by escaping the regime of limits while at bat and through imposing containment when arrayed on defense. The victors do return home, at least once more often than their opponents on any given day. Just as the hero in an adventurous melodrama, a ritually plotted quest of sentimentalized epic proportions, the triumphant team goes unbounded and boundless. The figure four thus expresses the other and desirable fate of the protagonist of this ritual melodrama: unconstrained boundlessness, at least for a day, or a series, or until the return of the next season and the next long cycle of games. The best at undergoing this recurrent ritual, moreover, are selected and installed, often with more care and deliberation than the American public gives to choosing its Presidents and Congressmen, in that peculiarly American Pantheon, the "Hall of Fame"—as though those so honored were heroes or demigods of the stature of an Odysseus, a Theseus or a Heracles.

IV

Coming home a hero may be expressive of boundlessness, yet how such a circumstance embodies sublimity deserves amplification. The emphasis placed upon individual performance, pitched contest and one of two possible yet mutually contrary fates clearly exhibits the desire and the struggle to exceed potentially binding limits. However, the manner in which such ritual melodrama approximates any rich sense of sublimity might seem indistinguishable from the sentimental and the purely unreflective.

The modern game of baseball is a rule-governed cultural activity and social construction of the imaginations of numerous, if not innumerable, Americans of the last century and a half. The game, moreover, thrives upon gestures that exceed definite limits. Baseball strives insistently for the representation, the physical enactment, of boundlessness. Making a full circuit of the bases and safely scoring a run, through a myriad of possible actions and strategies, is baseball's manifest proof of the exceeding of boundaries. The forces of constraint have been exceeded absolutely and with finality. Returning home safely, returning to the spot from which one has begun, is baseball's consummate and sublime image of mathematical magnitude. There simply is nothing more to enumerate once one has returned home safely and, *mutatis mutandis*, sublimely. The sublimity resides in the seemingly infinite pliability of "home" and "home plate." Home plate embodies the place of inescapable origin and potential and desirable return.

It is the figure of nothing—nothing gained, zero. However, it is also the figure of four and of boundless totality all in one. The deceptively and cunningly named fourth base expresses, graphically and eloquently, the image of an American *domestication* of the mathematically sublime.

V

Home plate signifies a subtle and infinite pliability—and not simply in the eyes of slumping batters, streaking pitchers, erratically generous umpires and agelessly wise pitching coaches. Home plate is the very center of the game of baseball, and its narrow contours can generate a range of possibilities which seem to be without definite circumference.

For instance, think about the imaginative invention that is “the strike zone.” A real game of baseball would get nowhere unless the minds and bodies of at least four persons—the pitcher, the catcher, the batter and the umpire—cooperated in bringing “the strike zone” into reality. Each of these parties, as well as any other player or onlooker, must picture the imaginary zone where strikes can be called. The strike zone cannot be visually delineated like first base, a foul line, or the fence or wall circumscribing the outfield. Yet it must be visualized; it must be imagined time and again with every pitch of the game in order for the game to happen at all. The strike zone floats imaginatively and transparently above home plate while a pitcher delivers a pitch to an immediate audience of three who are about to judge its merits and qualities, each in his own designated way.

The strike zone itself resembles a floating pentagonal prism. This always transparent, floating prism remains open to question, dispute or challenge until the umpire insists upon his right of judgment or unless the batter connects safely with a pitch for all to see. The prism of the strike zone floats in the technically finite space demarcated by five imagined geometric planes that project straight upwards from home plate and intersect at right-angles with two more imagined planes emanating from the knees and armpits of opposing batters. This floating prism may look like an idealized or generic house tipped back upon its rear wall, though quite often the “attic space” is neglected in descriptions of the strike zone. However, pitchers who depend upon a slow curve ball catching the “back part of the plate” certainly do not neglect to *imagine* this remote “homely” space. Catchers, pitchers, batters and umpires must imaginatively construct the transparent prismatic space of the strike zone and plan, anticipate, react to or judge the movement of the ball through or around this momentarily floating invention of their collective and competing imaginations. The constricted spot of home plate, then, becomes a subtle and endlessly pliable volume of imaginary space once “play ball” has been announced.

Quite to the point, Tim McCarver, a former catcher with the St. Louis Cardinals and the Philadelphia Phillies, has reported the manner in which left-handed pitcher Steve Carlton imagined the strike zone and the ideal places for his pitches. In preparing for the time when he would take to the mound, Carlton

reportedly would stretch out horizontally in the trainer's room and appear to take a nap. Yet as Dave Anderson of *The New York Times* quotes McCarver as saying,

I found out that Lefty just had his eyes closed, visualizing the inner and outer parts of the plate. With the Cardinals he learned from Bob Gibson that the inside two inches and the outside two inches of the plate are where a pitcher gets batters out. Home plate is 17 inches wide, but Gibson always talked about how those two inches on the inside and those two inches on the outside were where pitches had to be. Some people think you pitch up and down, but the way to get batters out is in and out. By visualizing those inside and outside corners, Lefty believed that the mind will dictate what the body will do.⁴

Even before taking the field, one of the finest recent pitchers of the game constructed in his mind's eye the imaginary space of the strike zone and the minutely precise edges of its total volume that he intended to appropriate as his own constricted terrain.

The imaginary space of the strike zone can open out upon wider fields of possibility. It is indeed the centering point for a hemisphere of possibilities, three-quarters of which will be ruled "foul." Yet the quarter which is deemed "fair" offers some imaginative mathematical and geometrical variations on an ancient conundrum—namely, *squaring the circle*. The plane of the playing field is exactly a single quadrant of a circle; 90° of a full 360° has been demarcated as "fair" playing ground. Of course, the numbers 90 and 360 also figure in the distances between bases as well as the total distance in a complete circuit of the bases. There is something very harmonious in the mathematical fact of 360 feet in a complete *circuit* of the bases. Even the often-repeated phrase "circle the bases" underscores the congruence between the distance covered in a complete circuit and the number of degrees that geometrically demarcate the figure of a circle. The infield diamond is itself a square, yet it also yields the imaginary shape of a circle. The 360-foot design of the diamond thus offers a deceptively simple and marvelously subtle answer to the classical riddle of how the circle can be squared—that is, how to square the 360° of a complete circuit of the horizon with the four corners of the world that sustain it.

Even the way in which the infield is contoured and set off from the outfield enhances this perpetual oscillation between the figures of the square ("the diamond") and the circle. Visually speaking, the figure of the infield oscillates continually between two geometrical figures, one of which embodies the right-angled design of the bases and base paths and the other of which tends towards a circle in the curving path of a runner and in the inner circle of defense that will try to circumvent any attempt to make a circuit of the bases.

The design of the infield, then, would seem to be an imaginative American riddling and unriddling of an ancient conundrum concerning the domiciling of the

encircling and endless volume of space. Perhaps the American game of baseball embodies not only a domesticated image of the mathematically sublime but also a visually suggestive image of the *geometrically* sublime. It may be no accident that many, especially older, baseball parks seem complete worlds in themselves—or offer vistas of their hometown communities and cities that seem to order, lend perspective to, and organize as an encircling horizon the otherwise fragmented chaos of sky and cityscape. In what may be the best book on the poetic implications of the sport of baseball, *Fathers Playing Catch with Sons*, Donald Hall claims that “the diamonds and rituals of baseball create an elegant, trivial, enchanted grid on which our suffering, shapeless, sinful day leans for the momentary grace of order.”⁵ Baseball is sentimental and trivial, but it also generates a powerful and appealing sense of ritual order and a perpetually youthful image of attainable sublimity. It is a game of skills and chances that plays profoundly, purposively, pleasurably and sentimentally with the simplest of mathematical series and geometrical configurations.

VI

One final matter remains. Baseball is, after all, a game of chance. One can accept that as a significant description of the manner of the game and as an integral feature of its poetics, or one can set out to tinker with chance and attempt to fix the outcome of the play of skills and chances. If one opts for the latter, then “the momentary grace of order,” which in Donald Hall’s marvelous phrase this game of chance offers, falls to grievous peril. The “Black Sox” Scandal of 1919-1921 is, of course, *the* case in point.

At a time when the Chicago White Sox were able to field one of the best teams ever to play the game, eight members of the 1919 American League pennant-winners accepted bribes to throw the World Series of that year to a much inferior opponent, the Cincinnati Reds, 5 games to 3. Shoeless Joe Jackson, Swede Risberg, Eddie Cicotte, Lefty Williams, Chick Gandil, Happy Felsch, Claude Williams and Buck Weaver—names and accompanying statistics stricken officially from the records of professional baseball—apparently conspired to fix or to go in silence about fixing the outcomes of games that should have been entrusted to the play of skills and open opportunities.⁶ Instead, greed and the gambling man’s cynical betrayal of communal trust provided the first major crisis in confidence for the American public of the 1920s. In a way, “Black Tuesday” of October 1929 finds a fitting presage of cynical opportunism and betrayal of trust in the fixed transactions of an October ten years earlier in time.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, moreover, revealingly locates the “Black Sox” Scandal at the amoral center of Jay Gatsby’s circle of choice friends and fantastic doings in *The Great Gatsby*. Nick Carraway is amazed and clearly at a loss in dealing with Gatsby’s business acquaintance Meyer Wolfsheim, a friendly connection whom Gatsby has known since the end of the First World War. Gatsby also appears to be familiar with the shady, underworld dealings of Wolfsheim and has

presented himself as a go-between for someone seeking a business liaison. When Carraway asks, "Who is he, anyhow, an actor?", Gatsby eventually confesses:

"Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he's a gambler." Gatsby hesitated, then added coolly: "He's the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919."

"Fixed the World's Series?" I repeated.

The idea staggered me. I remembered, of course, that the World's Series had been fixed in 1919, but if I had thought of it at all I would have thought of it as a thing that merely *happened*, the end of some inevitable chain. It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe.

"How did he happen to do that?" I asked after a minute.

"He just saw the opportunity."

"Why isn't he in jail?"

"They can't get him, old sport. He's a smart man."

The smart man, the gambler, is the clever predatory scavenger of *home*—Wolfsheim (wolf's home). He *fixes* the game of chance and coolly toys with the faith of the American public. And Gatsby admires him for it too. Indeed Gatsby himself, as Nick Carraway haltingly begins to understand, toys with the faith of would-be friends and admirers. Gatsby has tried to *fix* the play of dreams and thereby the fortunes of a future only earned by a real test of skills and a full effort. Yet Gatsby's "greatness" is a hollow fraud; Jimmy Gatz wins no real victories, achieves no real "momentary grace of order," no measure of uncontained sublimity. Gatsby prefers to insinuate his romantic and egotistical dreams into a complex and self-destructive network of deceptions, lies and underworld activities. And after Gatsby's death, Carraway, upon hearing Wolfsheim speak about how he sponsored Gatsby's early start in select circles in New York State, opines to himself: "I wondered if this partnership had included the World's Series transaction in 1919."⁸ The nadir of deception and betrayal, the abject absence of greatness, would be complicity in the "Black Sox" Scandal.

The cynical coolness of a Wolfsheim or the deceptively hollow career of a Gatsby imperil the status of chance and the true contest of skills needed to merit greatness in any game. Baseball is, in a peculiar way, the game at the morally bleak center of Fitzgerald's story, despite the obvious prevalence of numerous other sports. Fixing the game of baseball might seem a quick and daring route to the trappings of wealth and greatness, yet it betrays fundamentally the necessary communal trust and public delight in the ritual contest for "home" and for the mathematically sublime.

Notes

1. I borrow the phrase "the mathematically sublime" from Immanuel Kant's discussion of aesthetics and the sublime in *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York, 1951), 82-99. My use of the phrase yields a significant departure from Kant's notion.
2. "Baseball," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 3 (London, 1961), 160.
3. The basic formative period for the rules and specifications of modern baseball, or the American game of baseball, is essentially the years 1845 to 1922. See, for instance, the entry on "Baseball," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, especially 166C-G.
4. Dave Anderson, "Sports of The Times: Finally, Limitations for Lefty," *The New York Times*, June 29, 1986, 20.
5. Donald Hall, *Fathers Playing Catch With Sons* (San Francisco, 1985), 51.
6. "Baseball," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 166F. See also Warren Brown, *The Chicago White Sox* (New York, 1952), 106-12, and Eliot Asinof, *Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 World Series* (New York, 1963). The latter book served as the basis for John Sayles's 1988 film entitled *Eight Men Out*.
7. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 1925), 71.
8. Fitzgerald, 172. Needless to say, I do not engage the full complexities of either Gatsby's or Carraway's characters here. However, the aptness of the Black Sox Scandal for intimating an American crisis of confidence and betrayal of what constitutes greatness has often been overlooked in studies of Fitzgerald's book.

Contemporary Cultural Interpretations of Baseball: A Bibliographical Note

Baseball has drawn legions of writers, reporters, historians, fanatic speculators and cultural critics. The standard, scholarly history of the development of baseball from its amateur era through its formative phases as an organized business to its modern status as a major national institution is Harold Seymour's two-volume work *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York, 1960) and *Baseball: The Golden Age* (New York, 1971). A very fine narrative history of the sport can also be found in David Quentin Voigt's three-volume work, *American Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1966), *American Baseball: From the Commissioners to Continental Expansion* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1970) and *American Baseball: From Postwar Expansion to the Electronic Age* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1983). Voigt richly details the social, economic and cultural dimensions of the sport's development in the early nineteenth century to the commencement of divisional play in the late 1960s and the impact of color television and sports networks in the 1970s and 1980s. In his *America Through Baseball* (Chicago, 1976) Voigt charts the ways in which the myths, heroes and dilemmas of the sport reflect changes in American social structure and cultural concerns. Also in a fairly recent book, *A. G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball: The Promise of American Sport* (New York, 1985), Peter Levine composes a biography that focuses on the East-coast origins, Midwest successes and West-coast prosperity of one of organized baseball's most imperial promoters and most innovative sporting-goods entrepreneurs.

Melvin L. Adelman, George B. Kirsch, Gunther Barth, Steven A. Riess and Richard C. Crepeau all author instructive studies of the role of baseball in both

mirroring as well as helping to constitute American culture. In *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-70* (Urbana, Illinois, 1986), 97-183, Adelman examines the social and cultural failure of cricket to catch on as an American sport in the middle decades of the nineteenth century and details the social attractions and popularity of the "New York game" as a form of middle-class recreation and as a professionalized sport during the years 1845-70. Kirsch in his work, *The Creation of American Team Sports: Baseball and Cricket, 1838-1872* (Urbana, Illinois, 1989), composes a social history of the amateur era of baseball, focusing on its competition with and triumph over cricket and the formation of the first professional baseball league in 1871. Kirsch emphasizes the mid-century mood of chauvinism and the corresponding desire for a national game as well as the cultural need for a modernized sport featuring speed, action and relative closeness of spectators to an easily demarcated playing field. Kirsch also excels at detailing how the game weathered the Civil War as well as what were the social demographics of the game's earliest players. In *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1980), 148-91, Barth presents an evocative and scholarly account of the multiple cultural functions of the ball park in the social life of American cities in the second half of the nineteenth century. He explains how ball parks not only offered mass entertainment but also provided massive arenas for the education of the public—especially recent immigrants—in the rules and standards of American competition, conflict, cooperation and performative excellence. In his *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (Westport, Connecticut, 1980), Riess examines the dominance and multiple cultural functions of baseball during the 1870s to the 1920s. He demonstrates the game's institutional development and mythology as a complex social construction that fully underscores the ethos of progress and its values of tradition, culture, efficiency, fair play, healthy competition and social order. In *Baseball: America's Diamond Mind, 1919-1941* (Orlando, Florida, 1980), Crepeau explores the impact of the first World War, scandals, the Great Depression and commercialism upon a sport that he maintains provided a crucial social means for coping with the tensions that assaulted a democracy in crisis.

Quite recently Allen Guttman has placed baseball within a sociological and institutional interpretation of American sports. In *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of American Sports* (Chapel Hill, 1988), Guttman maintains that baseball—the American "intellectual metagame"—first displayed the modern sporting tendency toward universal rules, bureaucratization, statistical quantification of performances, and the quest for records. Furthermore, two very probing social psychological explorations of the professionalization and commercialization of sports, including baseball, are offered by Desmond Morris, "Sporting Behavior," *Manwatching* (New York, 1977), 305-10, and Christopher Lasch, "The Degradation of Sport," *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York, 1979), 181-219.

In what is perhaps the most astonishing lyric paean to the game, George Grella evokes the archetypal qualities of the myths and rituals of baseball as well as the epic and heroic aspects of its players and annals. His "Baseball and the American Dream," *Massachusetts Review* 16 (Summer 1975), 550-67, also maintains that baseball's mythology coincides with the American dream of green fields, ethical character and courage, and the aesthetic appeal of unenclosed space and temporary timelessness. In "The Perilous Quest: Baseball as Folk Drama," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Autumn 1977), 143-57, Dennis Porter employs Johan Huizinga's research on the nature of play and Vladimir Propp's work on the morphology of folktales to construct a morphology of baseball scenarios that highlights the structural meaning of the game as a ritual quest for home, for good and for survival. Such socially and culturally focused interpretations of the myths, ethics and aesthetics of the game duly underscore the aptness of Jacques Barzun's famous statement: "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball."